CALL OF THE WILD

The New Rush along Canada's Klondike Trail

by Harry Basch

Around Dawson City, they joke: "This isn't the end of the world, but you can see it from here."

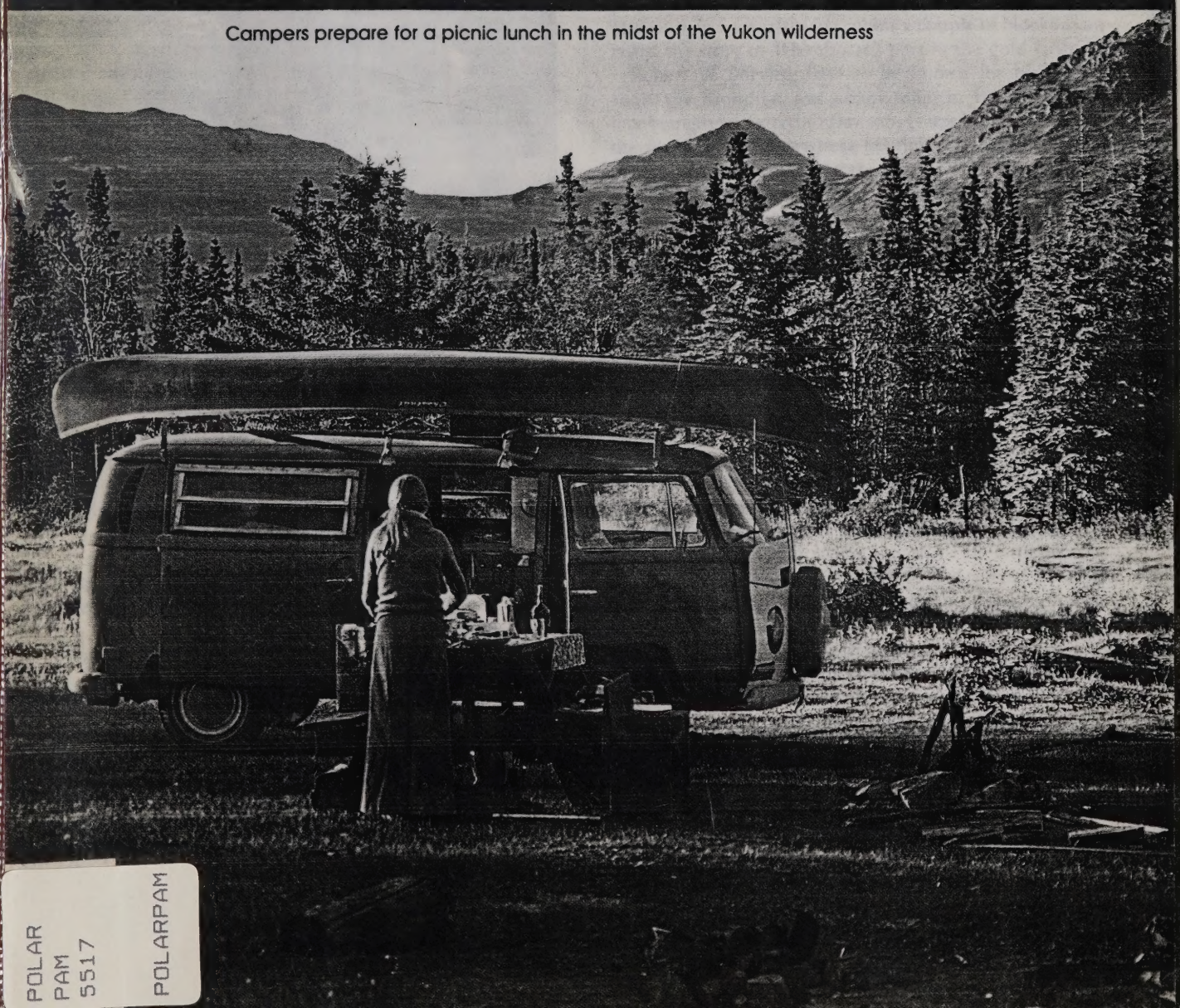
This is the kind of place for North Americans with a yen to wander, nagged by an insatiable restlessness to see what lies at the end of the road. It is written in the faces of men wearing rumpled plaid shirts and blue jeans as they climb out of dirty, mud-streaked RV's and pickups with license plates from Florida, New Brunswick, Texas, California and Ontario. They have made it to the place where the Yukon and the Klondike Rivers meet, to the fabled city of gold at the end of the infamous Trail of '98.

For a few, this is not enough, and they climb back in and move on, up another 460 miles of dirt, gravel and shale roads to the native village of Inuvik in the Northwest Territories. But most of them pause here, and if it is not strictly the end of the road, it's sure as shootin' the end of the rainbow.

Writer Harry Basch trots the globe in search of the exotic and the unusual. He delineated the pleasures of Fiji in Travel-Holiday's *March, 1985 issue.*

LATTER-DAY DREAMERS

It starts back in Alaska, in the panhandle town of Skagway, not with a macho truck or four-wheel drive, but in the



Campers prepare for a picnic lunch in the midst of the Yukon wilderness

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comfort of a Westours motorcoach (early on you learn that you don't call it a bus) with a driver named Cliff who regales you with old radio tapes of *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon.*

Latter-day dreamers no doubt will be among your compatriots. Tour members are likely to include an Oregon woman retracing her grandmother's steps with the aid of the old woman's original trip diary; a man from central California who was a weekend gold-miner in the Sierras wishing to trade shoptalk around the diggings in Dawson and, a Dutch immigrant seeking his new home.

You could say the drive up from the U.S.-Canadian border piques your appetite for pioneering. The new Klondike Highway, opened in May of 1981, connects Skagway to Carcross and Whitehorse with more efficiency and practicality but much less charm and whimsy than the old White Pass & Yukon Railway, which is no longer in operation.

Carcross used to be called Caribou Crossing, but the Canada Post Corporation requested a name change to keep from confusing it with several other Caribou Crossings througout Canada. Today, some 200 people, mostly Tagish Indians, live here. A tiny cemetery surrounded by a white picket fence contains the graves of Skookum Jim and Tagish Charley, who, with George Carmacks, discovered the first gold in the Klondike River area, along Bonanza Creek, on August 17, 1896. Nearby, an old paddle wheel steamer, the SS *Tutshi*, is being refurbished.

Yvette Cardozo

Panning for gold at Poverty Bar in Dawson City

The Stampeders of '98, who had reached Carcross and Lake Bennett, had overcome the greatest obstacle of their journey, the steep uphill climb out of Skagway — Dead Horse Trail — whose name attests to its harrowing toll. They had also passed over the Chilkoot Trail out of nearby Dyea (remember the famous photograph of an endless row of men toiling upward through the snow). Sheer determination and strength of will brought the luckiest and toughest to this point, where they could build boats or rafts during the winter before setting out along the Yukon for the 500-mile journey to Dawson.

It should have been easy from then on, but if things had gone well, there probably would not have been the city of Whitehorse.

GOLD RUSH ORIGINS

Today about 13,500 of the Yukon's 23,000 people live in Whitehorse, major metropolis and capital of the territory. The city developed because most of the gold rush traffic literally had to be funneled through here. The placid Yukon, wide and easy-going for most of its length, turns mean and nasty at Miles Canyon, in the churning waters of Whitehorse Rapids.

To save lives and precious supplies, the North West Mounted Police enforced portage, ordering passengers to walk around the rapids overland and let boat and outfit be steered through by an experienced pilot or, later, hauled over a specially-built wooden tramway. The fee was $25 and some of the Stampeders, down to their last few dollars, understandably balked. Writer and adventurer Jack London worked as boat pilot at Miles Canyon briefly before continuing north to Dawson.

By 1900, Whitehorse had grown from a cluster of tents and log cabins to a busy crossroads for river and rail traffic heading for the gold fields. The stern-wheeler SS *Klondike*, permanently beached beside the river and the MacBride Museum, in a group of log cabins a couple of blocks away, reveal the story of Whitehorse's part in the gold rush.

Robert W. Service, later to be known for his poems about the Klondike, was a bank teller in Whitehorse before being transferred to Dawson. It was here that he met the real Sam McGee, whose fictitious cremation "on the marge of Lake LaBarge" was set near Whitehorse.

The 333 miles of road from Whitehorse to Dawson, most of it unpaved but straight and smooth, can be covered in one day's drive, which is a pity for someone who loves offbeat discoveries like Moose Creek Lodge, an out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere restaurant, bakeshop, service station and rustic log cabin motel. Its eccentric moose antler sculptures and hand-pumped gasoline (slowest gas pump in town) make it one of those roadside coffee stops you think about for years afterwards.

STAR OF THE STORY

But Dawson city is the star of the Yukon, even though Whitehorse has eclipsed it in population and stolen away the title of territorial capital.

Coming to Dawson City is like meeting a childhood idol or your favorite silent movie star three or four decades after the fact and being surprised to find the old dear still alive, let alone lively enough to dance a fandango and tell a couple of salty tales.

Far from being some saccharine gold rush Disneyland or horsehair-stuffed historical monument, Dawson is alive and kicking and very much master of its own fate.

Parks Canada, perhaps the most skillful governmental agency in the world when it comes to recreating living history, is slowly and painstakingly acquiring and renovating Dawson's incomparable old buildings, although not without a lot of local grumbling. With another 25 years to

Yvette Cardozo

Dawson City's Dick Stevenson flashes his famous diamond-studded grin

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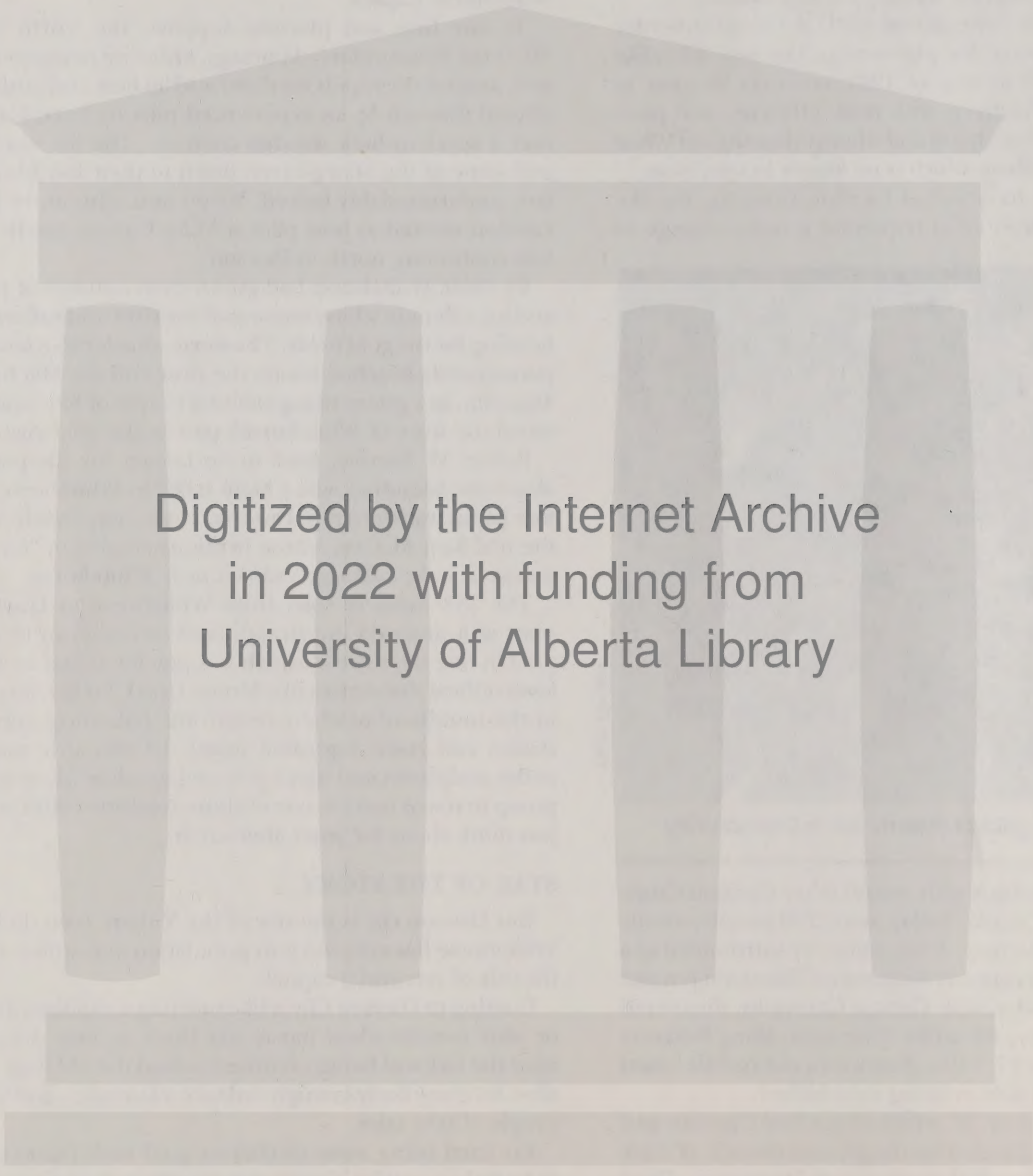

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go on the master plan, "money is always iffy," according to one local employee of Parks Canada.

Nevertheless, the buildings already restored — the splendid wooden Palace Grand Theatre, the old post office, the Robert W. Service cabin, the Arctic Brotherhood Hall (now Diamond Tooth Gertie's), Madame Tremblay's store, a number of private homes and other structures — help take you back to the boom-town days.

Sagging, unpainted wooden structures, which far outnumber the restored ones, wait their turns to be acquired, stabilized or renovated. Some look as if they might not last much longer. One, the colorful Strait's Auction House from 1901, sags in three directions at once, thanks to shifting permafrost under its foundations. It is Dawson's most photographed sight.

One of the first things you should do after arriving in Dawson is to acquire tickets to the "Gaslight Follies" at the Palace Grant Theatre, where a talented company of professional performers recreates a turn-of-the-century music hall show. You'll want to come back for a daytime tour of the theater itself, built from wood salvaged from several wrecked paddle wheelers in 1899 by "Arizona Charlie" Meadows. A star's dressing room upstairs pays homage to Klondike Kate, one of Dawson's best-known dance hall girls, who often appeared in a headdress of lighted candles, a daredevil gesture in the all-wooden saloons and theaters of Dawson.

WHERE THE ACTION IS

Diamond Tooth Gertie's, the only legal gambling casino in Canada, is the busiest place in Dawson. Reminiscent of Gilley's in Pasadena, Texas, the huge hall is crowded with gamblers, mostly locals, at the blackjack tables. Sartorially, they make Las Vegas look as formal as Monte Carlo; everyone is garbed in Mackinaw Coats, jeans, rubber boots, baseball caps and the like. Most tourists sit around little tables watching the stage, where Gertie, alias Molly O'Ryan, belts out blues songs in a Gay 90's dress Lillian Russell would have hocked her pearls for. A piano player with derby and sleeve garters pounds the piano and five — count 'em — cancan girls wait in the wings. Gertie winds up with a washboards-and-cymbals-routine that would have knocked 'em dead in the gold rush days.

But the real diamond-tooth hero of Dawson is Captain Dick Stevenson, the town's foremost entrepreneur. A former logger from New Brunswick, Stevenson also has been a government wolf poisoner, a riverboat captain and organizer of the largely unsuccessful "Miss Nude Yukon" pageant a few years ago. You'll usually find Captain Dick sitting around the Eldorado Sluice Box Bar with his scrapbook in his lap, ready to show you the diamonds in his front teeth (the number of them changes as he occasionally swallows or otherwise misplaces one) and his treasured letters from England's royal family. (The Prince of Wales "would be happy to accept your gracious offer of a cruise on the Yukon River on the next occasion of his visit

Town of Atlin, 60 miles south of Whitehorse, with spectacular Llewellyn Glacier

Chris Stanley

there.") Princess Ann, on the occasion of her visit, politely declined the Eldorado's famous Sour Toe cocktail, also dreamed up by Stevenson on one of those long Arctic nights. It seems you take a beer mug filled with champagne and toss in a pickled human toe for garnish.

Buffalo Dave Taylor, natty in a buffalo fur coat, gold brocade vest and strings of gold nuggets dispersed generously around his substantial person, conducts a morning tour of Dawson's gold fields along Bonanza Creek. Interspersed with his stories of yesterday's gold is a lively running commentary about today's mines. At one family mine, he points out a 68-year-old grandmother running the back hoe while her 14-year-old grandson works the sluice box.

"The two-to-ten-man operations are the only ones still working successfully today with the lower gold prices," says Taylor. Some 250 operating mines could be found along Bonanza Creek in 1983, Taylor adds, cautioning you not to move in for a closer look than what can be had from the public roadway.

You can get a good overall picture of the boom days in Dawson by visiting Harrington's Store, a permanent museum display of historic photographs and quotes from diaries and letters of the period, and the Dawson City Museum, which recreates interiors of homes and shops from turn-of-the-century artifacts.

But today's Dawson City is much more than a museum of yesterday's triumphs and heartbreaks. For a dizzying 10 years, from 1896 to 1906, it went from a muddy meadow to "the Paris of the North," then declined quietly. But it never died. One of the quotes on display in Harrington's Store is from Laura Berton, author of *I Married the Klondike*. "In the 25 years I lived there, I never thought of Dawson as a ghost town."

Today, with some 1,000 residents, it's a far cry from a town inhabited by ghostly creatures.

"There's a lot of optimism here," says one young woman who moved here in 1970, moved away and then came back. Some visitors simply stay on, drawn by the rugged summer beauty and winter quiet, the sense of community and the spirit of adventure.

Perhaps the real gold rush is yet to come. ○

* * *

RESOURCES Westours, 300 Elliott Avenue West, Seattle, WA 98119, (206) 281-3535, has a variety of land/sea tour combinations that include the Yukon. Pacific Western Airlines has twice weekly flights into Whitehorse from Vancouver, B.C. and Edmonton, Alberta; CP Air also services Whitehorse daily from Vancouver and Edmonton..

Hotels in Whitehorse include *Sheffield Whitehorse,* (800) 544-0970 and *Klondike Inn,* Westours, (206) 281-3535; in Dawson City, *Sheffield Dawson,* (800) 544-0970 and *Midnight Sun,* (403) 998-5495.

Restaurants in Dawson: *Midnight Sun, Downtown Hotel, Eldorado Hotel, Sheffield Dawson,* *continued on page 81*

Participants in the annual Outhouse Race, held on Labor Day weekend in Dawson City. This year's race will be held September 1

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KLONDIKE

continued from page 63

Klondike Kate's and *Gertie's Gourmet Sandwiches,* inside Diamond Tooth Gertie's.

Items you'll find of interest: MacBride Museum, 1st Avenue between Steele and Wood, Whitehorse, is open daily 9-9, small admission; The Gaslight Follies, Palace Grand Theatre, Dawson City, has nightly performances during summer at 8 (except Tuesday). Tickets may be purchased at the theater box office, advance purchase recommended. Diamond Tooth Gertie's in Dawson City opens nightly at 8 except Sunday, (no admission charge, no one under 19 admitted). There are a musical variety show and gambling casino, summer season only. Daily readings are held at the Jack London's Cabin and Robert Service's Cabin, free. Schedules for readings are available from the Dawson Visitor Center. "Dawson as They Saw It," a historical photo exhibition, is on view at Harrington's Store, no admission, open daily 10 A.M.-1 P.M. and 2-6 P.M., June through mid-September. Also, the annual Outhouse Race, one of the summer's main events, is held every Labor Day weekend. This year's race is scheduled for September 1.

Tour Opertors for the area are Gold City Tours, Dawson City, P.O. 84, Yukon Territory YOB 1GO, Canada, (403) 993-5175, which offers 3-hour gold field tours with optional gold panning (extra charge). Various tours operate through Alaska Highway Tours/Westours, 300 Elliott Avenue West, Seattle, WA 98119, (206) 281-3535, and Atlas Tours, 2nd and Wood Streets, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, (403) 668-3161.

For further information, contact Tourism Yukon, Box 2703, Whitehorse, YT Y1A 206, Canada, (403) 667-5340; Parks Canada, Box 390, Dawson City, YT YOB 1GO, Canada, (403) 993-5462; Klondike Visitors Association, Box 389, Dawson City, YT YOB1GO, Canada, (403) 993-5575.

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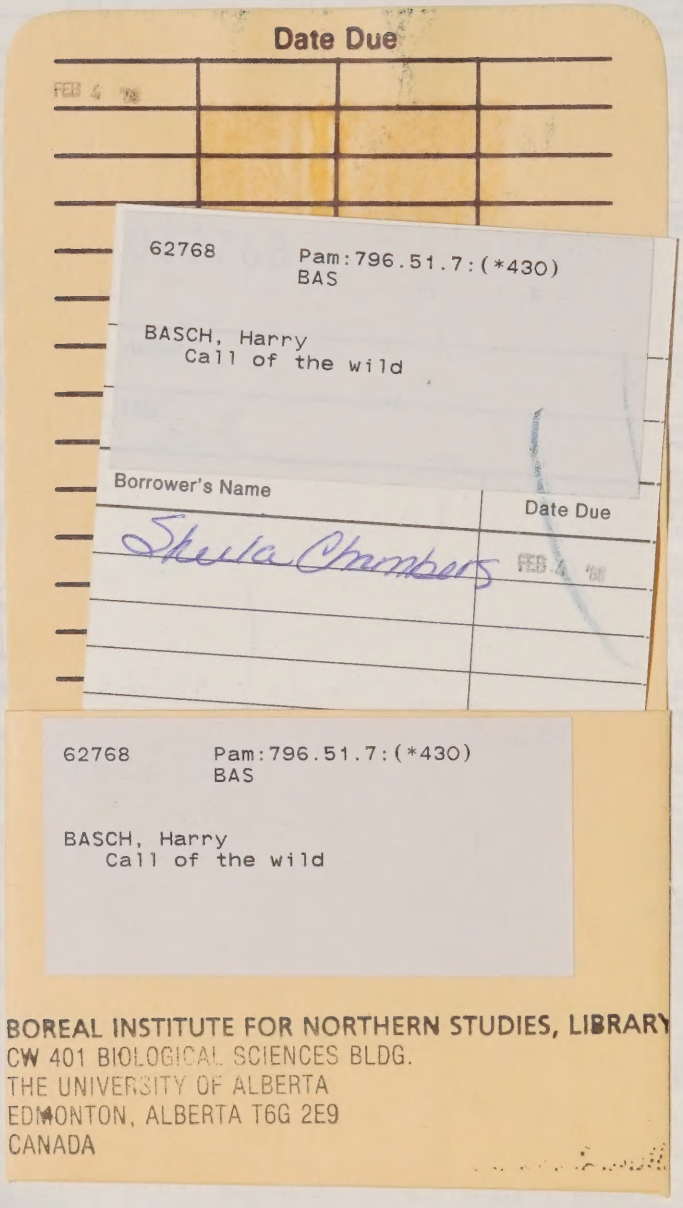
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